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Pied Beauty: The Baroque Microcosms of Daniel Seghers

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My choice of subject—the garland paintings of the Flemish Jesuit Daniel Seghers—may seem unusual given the volume’s focus. But, without denying the paramount importance of national parameters in matters cultural, “imaginary matters” are normally dynamically cross-cultural, not least in the visual arts and not least in the Spanish composite monarchy, where the cultural production of its constituent parts circulated beyond frontiers—facilitated, as I shall suggest here, by the transnational aesthetic of the Baroque. (And indeed in this case, also by the international networks of the Jesuits.) So in exploring this Flemish artist, I want to suggest that his garlands are an epitome of the Baroque to a strikingly unusual degree, and that it is precisely their deep-rootedness in the prevailing modes of thought, perception and representation of the period that accounts for their popularity across Europe, and across confessional divides. Like the Baroque itself, I will propose that Seghers’ world is pied, and I will use this notion to explore his compositions, their flowers, and their understated yet powerful dialectical play with binary opposites. In sum, my aim is to explore Seghers’ garlands as Baroque microcosms, for in them is found the Baroque in miniature, because in its most characteristic form: the pied.

Seghers was born in Antwerp in 1590. His widowed mother, who had converted to Calvinism, took him to live in Holland in the early 1600s. By 1611, and back in Antwerp, he was apprenticed to Jan Brueghel, and during his apprenticeship he reconverted to Catholicism. He entered the Society of Jesus in 1614, and took his vows as a temporal coadjutor in 1625. After being sent to Rome to study as an artist from 1625-27, he then lived most of his life in the Casa Professa in Antwerp, dying in 1661.¹

Brueghel had painted the first garlands around a sacred image for Cardinal Borromeo, who noted in 1626 that he used real fruit and flowers as devotional aids to centre prayer on God’s creation, but that in winter he used still-life paintings for the same end.² This format—a garland, painted by Brueghel, encircling an image painted by another artist such as Rubens, Hendrik van Balen or Giulio Cesare Procaccini, a format emulated by Seghers in his garland encircling the *Triumph of Love* by Domenichino (c1625-27; Louvre)—was developed by the Jesuit into an even more influential variant: festoons and bouquets placed around a cartouche, at the centre of which is an image (whether a painting, statue, bust or bas-relief) in a niche.³ (Seghers also painted vases of flowers and festoons hanging from ribbons.) As with Brueghel, the central image within the cartouche was painted by another artist, but Seghers appears generally to have had oversight of the whole, and one might surmise therefore that it was often his decision as to which artists to work with, and what the image within the cartouche was to represent. (It seems likely that Seghers himself painted the cartouches.⁴) The bulk of his garlands frame religious subjects; a tiny number, portraits; and some survive with the niche never having been filled. The most typical image is of the Virgin and Child, the flowers both constituting a form of *hortus conclusus* and linking these works with devotional images popular since medieval times, not least in the Low Countries.⁵

¹ See Thomas Dekens’ 1661 Jesuit necrology, printed in Alexandre Pinchart, ‘Daniel Seghers’, *Messenger des Sciences Historiques, ou Archives des Arts et de la Bibliographie de Belgique* (1868), 341-46. See also Marie-Louise Hairs, *The Flemish Flower Painters in the XVIIth Century*, translated by Eva Grzelak (Brussels: Lefebvre & Gillet, 1985), 117-24.

² Federico Borromeo, *Sacred Painting. Museum*, edited and translated by Kenneth S. Rothwell, introduction and notes by Pamela M. Jones (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2010), xxiii.

³ Gertrude Wilmers dates the first cartouche image by Seghers, one with an image by Schut, to 1627-31. See *Cornelis Schut (1597-1655): A Flemish Painter of the High Baroque* ([Belgium]: Brepols, 1996), 53. This is a decade earlier than Hairs who dates the earliest examples of Seghers’ garlanded cartouches to 1638 and 1641 (*Flemish Flower Painters*, 173). For Seghers’ popularisation of the garland-around-a-cartouche, see Hairs, 26, 30, and Susan Merriam, *Seventeenth-Century Flemish Garland Paintings: Still Life, Vision, and the Devotional Image* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 107.

⁴ See Hairs, *Flemish Flower Painters*, 176.

⁵ On Flemish garlands and Marian images, see David Freedberg, ‘The Origins and Rise of the Flemish Madonnas in Flower Garlands: Decoration and Devotion’, *Münchener Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst*, 32 (1981), 115-50. Also Merriam, *Seventeenth-Century*, 112-13, 150.

The division of labour between Seghers and his collaborators was typical of Flemish practice which saw artists specialising in particular genres. It obviously makes the issue of intention here a somewhat complex one, but such a division was typical of the period when workshop practices (such as Rubens'), multi-media ensembles (like Bernini's) and genres (not least court drama and opera) brought together individual artists and/or art forms. As can be seen from these examples, it enabled the creation of some of the most distinctive works and genres of the Baroque. Seghers' own inventory of his work rarely names the artists he collaborated with on his garlands, but from those he does name, the most favoured collaborators are Cornelis Schut, with 44 works, and Erasmus Quellinus II, with 28.⁶ (Other artists listed include Abraham van Diepenbeeck, Simon de Vos, Rubens, and Thomas Willeboirts Bosschaert.) It is the garlands with grisaille images—images described by Seghers simply as either 'van wit en swart' or 'barreleef'—that I want primarily to focus on here, and Quellinus is the artist to whom most grisaille works of this type are now attributed.

As a Jesuit, Seghers' works were not sold for profit. Rather, they were sent as diplomatic gifts by the Society.⁷ Aside from any devotional function then, they frequently functioned as commodities in the exchange culture of early modern Europe, but could obviously only do so effectively precisely because they were highly valued aesthetically and artistically. It is worth noting here that it was Seghers' part in these collaborative works that was the most highly prized. He received substantial gifts such as a gold palette and brushes, a gold chain, and a gold mahlstick.⁸ In contrast to these signifiers of both noble largesse and artistic eminence, Bosschaert simply received 110 florins to paint the full-length statue of the Virgin and Child in the central niche of Seghers' 1645 garland gifted to the Prince of Orange, now in the Mauritshuis, with Seghers receiving a gold cross and chain estimated at 3231 florins.⁹ And inventories normally mentioned Seghers' name alone in listing the garlands he produced in collaboration with others—indeed, the specific collaborator for a given work is often still unknown.

His fame was such that his studio in the Antwerp Casa Professa was visited by royalty: the Cardinal-Infante, governor of the Spanish Netherlands, in April 1635;¹⁰ Archduke Leopold-Wilhelm, his successor, in 1648; and the exiled Charles II in 1649.¹¹ The Habsburgs, not surprisingly given their territorial links to Flanders, collected his work: several were gifted to Archduke Leopold-Wilhelm during his time as governor,¹² for example, and six were recorded in 1667 in the Escorial,¹³ where they still remain, these possibly including the two works listed in his inventory as painted for Philip IV.¹⁴ His work was also owned by royalty across the confessional divide, the same inventory mentioning works in the possession of the queen-mother of France, the king of Poland, the Prince of Orange, the Emperor, Charles II of England, the Queen of Sweden, and the elector of Brandenburg.¹⁵ Royalty aside, it also reveals that his canvases were particularly popular with Spaniards.¹⁶

⁶ See the tabulation in Walter Couvreur, 'Daniël Seghers' inventaris van door hem geschilderde bloemstukken', *Gentse bijdragen tot de kunstgeschiedenis en de oudheidkunde*, 20 (1967), 87-158 (p.140).

⁷ See Merriam, *Seventeenth-Century*, 117-20.

⁸ See Merriam, *Seventeenth-Century*, 55.

⁹ See Hairs, *Flemish Flower Painters*, 121, 146. For this canvas, see Seghers' entry in Couvreur, 'Daniël Seghers' inventaris', no.92 (p.104).

¹⁰ For Chiflet's contemporary account of the visit, see Auguste Castan, 'Contribution à la biographie du portraitiste A. de Vries', *Bulletins de l'Académie Royale des Sciences, des Lettres et des Beaux-Arts de Belgique*, 7, 3^{me} série (1884), 199-202 (pp.201-02). Of the two works presented to the Cardinal-Infante on that occasion, one is listed by Seghers in his inventory, where he also notes that it is now in Spain: Couvreur, 'Daniël Seghers' inventaris', no.119 (p.110). For the possible identification of the image of the Virgin presented, see Hairs, *Flemish Flower Painters*, 125-29 and Wilmers, *Cornelis Schut*, 172 and 298 n.68.

¹¹ See Hairs, *Flemish Flower Painters*, 121.

¹² See Couvreur, 'Daniël Seghers' inventaris', nos.159 (p.116) and 188 (p.119).

¹³ See Francisco de los Santos, *Descripción breve del monasterio de S. Lorenzo el Real del Escorial, única maravilla del mundo* (Madrid: Joseph Fernández de Buendía, 1667), 71v-72r, 77. See also Bonaventura Bassegoda, *El Escorial como museo: La decoración pictórica mueble en el monasterio de El Escorial desde Diego Velázquez hasta Frédéric Quilliet (1809)* (Bellaterra, Barcelona, Girona and Lleida: Memoria Artium, 2002), 161-62, 170, 175-76.

¹⁴ See Couvreur, 'Daniël Seghers' inventaris', nos.201-02 (p.120).

¹⁵ See Couvreur, 'Daniël Seghers' inventaris', no.33 (p.96); no.79 (p.102); nos.90, 92, 93 (p.104); nos.111 and 189 (pp.108, 119); no.192 (p.119); no.205 (p.121); nos.186, 209-11 (pp.119, 122). In his necrology, Dekens comments that 'pictas ab eo tabulas, rex catholicus, tresque imperatores, archiducesque aliquot, et summi allii principes ac Belgii gubernatores sibi oblatas lubenter acceperunt et gratum amicum prolixo testati' (Pinchart, 'Daniel Seghers', 343).

Baroque Microcosm

What is striking about Seghers' garlands is the unusual degree to which they encapsulate the entirety of the Baroque. As profoundly representative products of their time and place, they are essentially a Baroque monad, embodying and deploying the key binaries and topoi central to seventeenth-century culture and thought. This I would suggest is one of the reasons behind their popularity: they are true exemplars of the cultural preoccupations, and the visual and intellectual tropes, of early modern Europe. Major binary concepts now seen as defining elements of the Baroque mentality that are operative in Seghers' Baroque microcosms are appearance/reality, *engaño/desengaño*, temporal/eternal, matter/spirit, secular/religious. And compositional and structural devices typical of the Baroque integral to his work include seriality, framing, and *mise-en-abyme*.

The key set of cultural binaries that are in play are appearance/reality, and thus *engaño/desengaño*. (These, in turn, mediate religious binaries such as temporal/eternal.) The complex relationship between the strikingly realistic floral still life elements—in his contemporary account of the Cardinal-Infante's visit to Seghers' studio, Chiflet notes, using one of the early-modern clichés found frequently in discussion of *trompe l'œil* works, that the flowers were 'si nayves que la main estoit tentée à les cueillir'¹⁷—and the *trompe l'œil* statues, busts and bas-reliefs at their centre is such that their respective and mutual illusionism is deconstructed before our eyes. This may happen in one of two key ways. The first is through the difference in facture between the flowers and cartouche painted by Seghers and the grisaille centrepiece painted by another artist.¹⁸ The former are very highly and meticulously finished, the cause of their astonishing *trompe l'œil* impact, with incredibly precise rendering of botanical detail; the latter, whilst still demonstrably intended to deceive the eye, nevertheless are such that their facture is, if certainly not intrusively visible, still in places often discernible. In the *Garland with Virgin, Child and the Infant John the Baptist* (Real Academia de San Fernando, Madrid), for example, certain elements of the grisaille bas-relief by Quellinus, such as the cloth around Jesus' waist or John the Baptist's hair, look on close inspection painted rather than sculptured, and this element of facture subtly destabilises the very illusionism of stone being otherwise sought, and thereby also the illusionism of the whole. (This painterly difference—one so important in seventeenth-century theory and practice—must have been acceptable, and therefore one might infer desired, since Seghers need not have collaborated with an artist had their finish not been what he wanted.)

The second way in which the relationship between image and bouquets simultaneously asserts-yet-undermines *trompe l'œil* illusionism is through the *desbordamiento* of the central image. Such *desbordamiento* can occur when the centre is an illusionistic statue, as with the protrusion of the Virgin's foot and a fraction of her dress over the edge of the niche in Seghers and Bosschaert's *Garland with Statue of Virgin and Child* (Mauritshuis), or her foot and the hem of her dress jutting over the curved lip of the niche in his and Quellinus' *Garland with Virgin and Child* (Escorial). And, even more problematically, when it contains a painting, which may or may not be intended to seem an actual real-life figure rather than a fictive painting.¹⁹ Examples include Ignatius' book resting on and over the niche edge in Seghers and Schut's *Garland with St Ignatius*, or the same pair's *Garland with Virgin and Child*, where Jesus' left leg and right foot jut out of the central niche (both Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp). This is a traditional way of bringing to life an image by pushing it literally into the viewer's space. But the last example cited causes a typical ontological indeterminacy for the *trompe l'œil* as *trompe l'œil*: either the inset image-in-colour is somehow real (i.e. the figures are not images, but really present) or, the more likely interpretation, this protrusion signals that both it and the cartouche are painted, the inset image thereby piercing/shattering the *trompe l'œil* of the cartouche.²⁰ In the case of this *Garland with Virgin and Child* there is a further complication, for there is a noticeable difference in facture within the figurative elements themselves. The Virgin's right hand, for example, in its freer rendering and *sfumato* appearance, looks far much more painterly than her left, so that Schut quite literally creates an illusion on the one

¹⁶ See also Couvreur's general overview: 'Daniël Seghers' inventaris', 145.

¹⁷ Castan, 'Contribution à la biographie du portraitiste A. de Vries', 201-02.

¹⁸ On the difference in facture between distinct elements of garland paintings, see Merriam, *Seventeenth-Century*, 47, 67, 70 and, specifically re Seghers, 111, 116-17.

¹⁹ Even in the latter case, 'fictive' is itself a problematic term, because such an image is obviously both an actual painting and is meant to function as an illusionistic painting within the whole.

²⁰ One reason for the second interpretation being the more likely is that, as Wilmers notes, the flowers here 'dwarf the human forms' (*Cornelis Schut*, 167; and also 54). Merriam mentions the features that make the figures undeniably present

hand, and takes it away on the other by emphasising that what we see is painted. Even in Schut's central image, then, illusion is simultaneously forcibly asserted and subtly denied. What Seghers and his colleagues such as Schut and Quellinus create within and especially between their respective contributions are works that make us ponder how many levels of *trompe l'œil* there are.

Central to the dialectic between appearance and reality, therefore, is the relationship between part and whole, and periphery and centre (i.e. flowers and niche image). And this dialectic is mediated through the seriality of framing—inwards from the real frame, to the dark background, the cartouche, its flowers, and finally then to the central niche frame—a seriality which sets up a dizzying *mise-en-abyme*. The juxtaposition between vibrant flowers and grisaille image begins the process of the contrasting of matter and spirit, the worldly and the divine, the temporal and the eternal, binary opposites that the composition both holds in tension and oscillates between. Crucial to this juxtaposition is precisely the chromatic contrast between centre and periphery, as we shall see.

And as with the lexis of a Góngora, a Racine or a Calderón, inventiveness, expressiveness, lies in the repetition of, and variations on, a limited range of forms. (There is a major difference with Seghers' master, Brueghel, here.) What we have in Seghers is an example of the power of limited variation. We see this in his repeated use of certain flowers for, despite the floral diversity, key species predominate. The bouquets and festoons within a single work, considered as variations on limited elements, are each like a twist in a kaleidoscope, and Seghers achieves coherence between them through repetition of the same flowers and colours. And even when comparing bouquets between works, it is clear that Seghers makes use of matching chromatic patterning; that is to say, of bouquets that, although often having distinct species in each canvas, nevertheless have similar colours in similar positions within them. So, for example, the middle-bottom and the bottom-right bouquets of Seghers' *Garland with Virgin, Child and St Leopold* (Musée Fabre) parallel strongly the colour patterns and colour locations of the middle-bottom and bottom-right bouquets of his *Garland with Statue of Virgin and Child* (Mauritshuis). This is also an indication of Seghers' working method.

A final compositional element worth singling out is the arrangement of the flowers themselves which are far looser and more naturalistic than the tight and dense wreathes of Brueghel. Seghers' swags and bouquets not only have stems, offshoots and tendrils seemingly randomly merging from them, but are frequently linked by strands of ivy curling across and around the cartouche. These elements give the composition a sense not simply of randomness or nonchalance—the floral equivalent of *sprezzatura* or Gracián's *despejo*—but thereby their vivid sense of motion and thus of life.

Pied beauty

Seghers' garlands are thus intensely and unusually culturally expressive of the Baroque as a style of thought and a mode of perception and representation. But examining fully these elements within Seghers' work is not what I want to do here. Rather I want to explore the way that the whole of Seghers' world—like the Baroque itself—is pied. This notion links three things: (1) the garlands' flowers, (2) a key theory of the Baroque, and (3) the works' eschatological undercurrent. And it also conveys both the works' production and their composition: Seghers' cartouche-and-garlands and his collaborators' central images. It is thus central both to his aesthetic and to the religious import of his work—as it is also to the Baroque.

Seghers has a marked preference for flowers that are varicoloured—whether veined, flamed, streaked, dappled, or stippled—such as the tulip, Hungarian iris, fritillaria meleagris, aquilegia, morning glory, summer snowflake, and carnation. Of these, the most culturally representative, and the best exemplar of variegation, is the tulip. Tulips were introduced to Europe in the 1550s by a Flemish envoy of the emperor to the Ottoman court.²¹ They were prized for their colour, and variegated tulips were the most highly prized of all.²² Hence their predominance in the work of Seghers and other early modern flower painters. Variegation is due to a virus, a fact not discovered until the twentieth century, and this meant that there was no certainty that a bulb would produce a flower of a certain variegated hue, an instability that played its part in the 'tulip mania' in the Netherlands in the 1630s.²³ (That what was perceived as most beautiful and most highly valued should

(*Seventeenth-Century*, 109.) On the size relationship between flowers and figures in Seghers, see Nina Ayala Mallory, *La pintura flamenca del siglo XVII* (Madrid: Alianza, 1995), 296.

²¹ See Anne Goldgar, *Tulipmania: Money, Honor, and Knowledge in the Dutch Golden Age* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 32.

²² See Paul Taylor, *Dutch Flower Painting 1600-1720* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), p.10; Goldgar, *Tulipmania*, 39.

²³ See Goldgar, *Tulipmania*, 40, 115, 170, 286.

arise from a flaw is distinctly appropriate for this most Baroque of flowers.) In pondering why tulips and shells were so compelling, Goldgar argues that collectors lived in an ‘aesthetic universe’ that valued variegation, hence also the popularity of marble, agate and jasper in cabinets of curiosities.²⁴ The reason why variegation was integral to the Baroque, I would suggest, was because the Baroque fully embraced Augustine’s ‘aesthetic of antithesis’—Augustine, to explain evil, saw the positive as accentuated by the negative, as, by analogy, black accentuates white in a painting (*City of God*, XI.xxiii)—and embraced it not simply as an aspect of its theodicy, but as integral to its aesthetic.

As well as being a major aesthetic principle, piedness can in turn be interpreted as a visible manifestation of the fold, the operative function of the Baroque according to Deleuze. The fold expresses the relationship between binaries, and especially the primary Leibnizian binary of body and soul, one in which ‘if two really distinct things can be inseparable, two inseparable things can be really distinct’.²⁵ Taking up Leibniz’s famous analogy between veins in marble and innate ideas, Deleuze writes that

the text also fashions a way of representing what Leibniz will always affirm: a correspondence and even a communication between [...] the pleats of matter and the folds in the soul. A fold between the two folds? And the same image, that of veins in marble, is applied to the two under different conditions. Sometimes the veins are the pleats of matter that surround living beings held in the mass, such that the marble tile resembles a rippling lake that teems with fish. Sometimes the veins are innate ideas in the soul, like twisted figures or powerful statues caught in the block of marble.²⁶

Floral variegation, like veins in marble, is an example of such folding. And the variegated tulip, the seventeenth-century flower *par excellence*, literally embodies (the notion of) the fold. Through the folding of colours in its highly prized flames and feathers, the tulip is thereby emblematic of the various binaries, entirely distinct, yet inseparably folded together, that Seghers’ composition embodies and whose terms are pitted against their opposites: appearance and reality, temporal and eternal, inner and outer. The tulip is truly synecdochic: of the seventeenth-century floral obsession, of the Deleuzian Baroque, and thus of Seghers’ work. And following a long-standing exegetical tradition, the colours often depicted as intertwined—white/red—can be taken to symbolise the ultimate fold, the distinct-yet-inseparable divinity and humanity of Christ.²⁷

So the dappled and the pied express the nature of the world with its folded binaries, distinct-yet-inseparable, such binaries being also conveyed in the preponderance of variously variegated flowers in Seghers’ garlands. But the garlands, with what we might call their Christian centres, position the viewer to consider that all that is now inextricably folded together will unravel. This potential lies at the very heart of the devotional function of Seghers’ religious garlands. I would like here to bring in Gerard Manley Hopkins, another Jesuit finely attuned to the beauty of the natural world and for whom the pied and the dappled are also important aesthetic and ethical notions. For Hopkins gives a twist to the Deleuzian fold. He praises—as we should certainly see Seghers’ similarly praising—the earth’s ‘pied beauty’ and its creator:

Glory be to God for dappled things—
For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches’ wings;
Landscape plotted and pierced—fold, fallow, and plough;
And áll trades, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spáre, strange;
Whatever is fickle, frecklèd (who knows how?)
With swift, slów; sweet, sóur; adázzle, díim;

²⁴ Goldgar, *Tulipmania*, 86. See also 88, 89, 117.

²⁵ See Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, translated by Tom Conley (London: Continuum, 2003), 12.

²⁶ Deleuze, *Fold*, 4.

²⁷ These colours can also symbolise Christ’s virginity and martyrdom. See Jennifer O’Reilly, ‘«Candidus et rubicundus»: An Image of Martyrdom in the «Lives» of Thomas Becket’, *Analecta Bollandiana*, 99 (1981), 303-14 (pp.304-05). My thanks to Terry O’Reilly for this reference.

He fathers-forth whose beauty is pást change:
Práise him.²⁸

But in a later poem, ‘Spelt from Sibyl’s Leaves’, the variegated acquires an ethical and a religious import. Hopkins envisages, as night falls, the earth at a time, the end of time, when ‘her béing has unbóund’ and ‘her dápple is at énd’. Life, once ‘wáned’, will then

.....wínd
Off hér once skéined stained véined variety | upon, áll on twó spools; párt, pen, páck
Now her áll in twó flocks, twó folds—bláck, white; | right, wrong[.]²⁹

This unskining of what has been inextricably intertwined and enfolded introduces the moral (and thus religious) imperatives that will forever separate all into black/white, right/wrong. We might by extrapolation see that what is envisaged here is not simply the unravelling of the variegated, the dappled, the pied—of what is posited as a feature of all nature, and intrinsic to its beauty, as also in Seghers—but the unfolding of (Deleuzian) binaries at the end of time: matter/spirit, appearance/reality, temporal/eternal, inner/outer. What is now distinct-yet-inseparable will be separated—and separated in an act of final reckoning.³⁰ (To use the Biblical parable, germane here because of its metaphorical terms, the tares will be separated from the wheat at harvest.³¹) Hopkins’ eschatology is one that Seghers and his contemporaries would have shared. As such, this envisaged final unfolding is what subtends and awaits the folded binaries embodied in Seghers’ works; it is precisely why they are a microcosm not simply of the Baroque as a style and as a mode of representation, but of reality as perceived during the Baroque. When what is folded together unravels, what remains for Seghers is what he posits at the quiet, static centre: God. It is this quiescent centre on which I want finally to focus.

Although the centre and the periphery, the eternal and the transient, reality and appearance, are distinct and opposite, they are nevertheless inextricably bound together this side of the dissolution imagined by Hopkins at the end of time. This duly acknowledged, the final unfolding and unbinding envisaged by Hopkins is intimated, and thereby I would argue foreshadowed, in the viewer’s engagement with the diverse elements that Seghers’ work holds together, not least the interplay between black background, multi-coloured flowers, and grisaille statues or bas-reliefs, and the way these work upon the eye.

In Seghers’ world, the compositional and chromatic tension between the bouquets and the niche resolves for the viewer always with and in the centre. The eye is drawn to the outer, vibrant colours, but always back to the niche-image. For in contemplating a Seghers canvas, the viewer is aware of the peculiar impact on the eye of this grisaille centre, which simultaneously recedes yet emerges.

The recessionary quality of the sculpture or bas-relief occurs both because of the dominance of the floral colours vis-à-vis the grisaille and because, as Merriam notes, ‘the figure—ostensibly the focal point of the image—lies at the edge of perception, somewhat difficult to make out, in some cases never fully cohering, especially relative to the precisely described flowers’.³² Its ghostly immanence is like encountering a figure at dusk which the eye makes out fully only when it becomes accustomed to the gloom.

Yet despite the grisaille image’s relative lack of clarity, when the whole work is considered as *trompe l’œil*, then the materiality of the inner sculpture or bas-relief is more permanent than the blooms and leaves surrounding it whose colours otherwise contribute so strongly to its recessionary quality. For notwithstanding the vibrant colours that make them seem so flourishing, so alive, such blooms are, as cuttings, already dead. Although Seghers, unlike his many Dutch counterparts, does not explicitly emphasise decay or transience, nevertheless life isn’t fleeting here, it has already flown.³³ The vibrancy of

²⁸ Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Major Works*, edited by Catherine Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 132-33.

²⁹ Hopkins, *Major Works*, 175.

³⁰ If intertwined red/white are read as symbolising the hypostatic union of Christ’s humanity and divinity, then from a Christian perspective this would obviously be a categoric exception to such unfolding.

³¹ See Matthew 13: 24-30. My thanks to Eric Southworth for drawing my attention to this example of pre- and post-parousia intertwining.

³² Merriam, *Seventeenth-Century*, 107.

³³ On Calvinist Holland making more explicit use of *vanitas* connotations in still lives than Catholic Flanders, see Hans Vlieghe, *Flemish Art and Architecture 1585-1700* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 9. On the

Seghers' flowers is thus doubly false and illusory: they are cut, and thus dead; and they are painted. This is the works' strongest paradox: what appears so alive is, contrary to all appearances, doubly dead.³⁴

It is worth mentioning that even the non-grisaille central images have a recessional quality; they *appear* less present than the flowers (and often less 'real' because, like the grisaille images, their facture is frequently such that they are more obviously painted, as mentioned above). This is not simply to do with their location, that is to say, with their being on a secondary plane, but with their relationship with the colours of the flowers, for the usually very dark background of the whole composition throws into relief the brighter, frontal elements, that is, the flowers themselves, and causes them thereby to have far greater impact on the eye.

All this said, the recessional quality of the grisaille image caused by these factors transmutes as we are visually lead to focus on the centre and thus to become absorbed in it; as we are, it emerges as the dominant element. This counter-recessional process of emergence is occasioned by a number of compositional features. Most obviously, the eye is drawn to the niche precisely because of its centrality, as also by its serial framing. In addition, flowers around the central niche also often have a deictic, almost gestural function as well as a symbolic one that serves literally to guide the eye. Roses, the most Marian of flowers, are used thus in several compositions, with a pink bud directly over the Virgin's head and another tracing an arc towards Jesus' in Seghers and Diepenbeeck's *Garland with Virgin, Child and St Leopold* (Musée Fabre) and similarly white buds above the Virgin's head in his and Bosschaert's *Garland with Statue of Virgin and Child* (Mauritshuis). Finally, it is only by drawing close that details emerge such as, in the garland in the Academia de San Fernando in Madrid, the 'engraved' writing on the infant John the Baptist's banderol within the bas-relief (ECCE AGNUS DEI). Indeed the subject itself may only be discernible by drawing close: with the *Garland with Christ and St Catherine of Siena* (Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp), for example, it is only when very close to that it is possible to see what each cherub is holding out to the kneeling saint in the bas-relief and thereby to understand that the subject is St Catherine of Siena being offered by Christ either a crown of gold or one of thorns; her choice of the latter then being in turn reflected in the dominance of thorns and thistles in the garland painted by Seghers.³⁵ In Seghers' inventory, the only flora he mentions aside from roses tend to be thistles and thorns, and these normally with subjects, like here, were they are symbolically appropriate.³⁶ A generic phrase he uses, 'distels en dorens' (thistles and thorns), recalls Genesis 3:18 ('spinas et tribulos germinabit tibi, et comedes herbas terrae'). This creates a link between garlands and the post-lapsarian world, and is another indication of their microcosmic quality. What these examples show is how the viewer's meditative engagement often involves pondering what may unite flowers and centre (the former through their species or their colours symbolically embodying or expressing the latter) and, as one is increasingly absorbed more in the centre, what ultimately separates them (through the distinct binaries each embodies).

A meditative engagement is thus brought about through a process of gradual absorption not simply in the work, but in its centre. The result of this, again paradoxically, is that the inner grisaille becomes more present than the most vibrant of the colourful flowers. And it is in and through this absorptive process that the numinous emerges. There is an interesting contrast with Zurbarán here: stillness is not a product of focused isolation, intense realism, and an all-encompassing black environment; it is rather an emerging stillness, one centred not on things, on exemplars of material reality, but on what is literally in their midst: religion.

The sacred is set apart stylistically and often chromatically. But it is also literally in the midst, and our eyes are endlessly drawn to it despite the attractions of the material, of the transient, of life—of the flowers. This raises the question of the potential Jesuit dimension of Seghers' garlands, for it is tempting to link this compositional aspect with the Ignatian exhortation to 'seek God in all things'.³⁷ This is something various critics have done.³⁸ But whilst relatable to this Jesuit

Reformation leading to an emphasis on *vanitas*, see the general comments in Alain Tapié, *Le sens caché des fleurs. Symbolique & botanique dans la peinture du XVII^e siècle* (Paris: Adam Biro, 2000), 85.

³⁴ On flowers being dead, see Harry Berger, *Caterpillars: Reflections on Seventeenth-Century Dutch Still-Life Painting* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), 68, 87.

³⁵ For the correct identification of the subject matter, previously held to depict Teresa of Avila, see Y. Morel-Deckers, 'Catalogus van de 'Bloemenguirlandes omheen een middentaferel' bewaard in het Koninklijk Museum te Antwerpen', *Jaarboek van het Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kuntsten Antwerpen* (1978), 157-203 (p.172).

³⁶ See Couvreur, 'Daniël Seghers' inventaris', nos.117, 152, 170, 176, 177, 178, 186, 203, 221, 224, 232, 235.

³⁷ For this exhortation, see *Constituciones de la Compañía de Jesús*, edited by S. Arzubialde, J. Corella, and J. M. García-Lomas (Bilbao and Santander: Mensajero / Sal Terrae, n.d.), no.288, p.150 and Ignacio de Loyola, *Ejercicios espirituales*, in *Obras completas*, edited by Ignacio Iparraguirre and Cándido de Dalmases, 2nd edition (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores

imperative, the niche's placement is distinct from it, because although the divine is literally amidst the flowers, it is not through contemplating them that the divine is primarily reached, but by not contemplating them. Broadly speaking, then, what we have here is not so much an embodiment of an important aspect of Ignatian teaching, but a common manifestation in both of a major aspect of early modern Catholicism which emphasised immanence, as opposed to the transcendence more typical of Protestant culture. If anything, the devotional optic is one that embodies rather what Ignatius says in the preamble to the first week of the *Ejercicios espirituales* where, stating that mankind was created to praise and serve God, he notes that consequently 'el hombre tanto ha de usar dellas ["las otras cosas sobre la haz de la tierra"]', quanto le ayudan para su fin, y tanto debe quitarse dellas, quanto para ello le impiden'.³⁹ Here, then, the flowers are left aside as one focuses on the centre.

Similarly, the format of Seghers' works is not one that embodies the Ignatian 'composition of place', although critics have suggested the contrary—albeit sometimes with cautious vacillation.⁴⁰ The careful application of each of the senses in turn to a scene being meditated upon in order to make it more immediate, real and visceral that Ignatius outlines in the *Ejercicios* seems to be intended in no meaningful way by Seghers. His works are not composed such as actively to encourage in a viewer a meditative 'composition of place'. Barring the fact that he was a Jesuit, there no more reason to apply this method to a work by Seghers than there is to any such work, or indeed to any religious painting. Indeed, there is in fact less reason to do so since the vast majority of the inset scenes (whether depicting illusionistic statues or painted images) are static and non-narrative compositions, which works against the application of the senses, not least when the viewer is confronted with a stone statue or bas-relief. If there is a specifically Jesuit dimension to Seghers' compositions, I would suggest that it may be found in the notion of *mediocritas*, rather than in these two possibilities repeatedly outlined by critics. For Seghers' bouquets offer neither the extreme plenitude of a Brueghel, nor the radical simplicity of a Zurbarán; what he provides is an Aristotelian—a Jesuit—*via media*.⁴¹ It is in this compositional element that the most Jesuit dimension of his work is to be found.

I have used Hopkins' notion of pied beauty as a concept to explore and explain Seghers' floral universe. His compositions are in themselves dappled, with their distinct-yet-inseparable elements. Yet the gravitational pull of the centre, through the visual process of recession-yet-emergence, means the composition gestures towards and continually intimates the final unfolding which, following Hopkins and in line with the stark eschatological focus of early modern Christianity, will separate definitively and eternally the material and transient from the spiritual and ever-lasting. The flowers' vitality is an illusion—they are already dead—and the central 'truth', so often literally set in stone within the garlands, is what for Seghers will alone endure. This is the devotional process at work, and at work precisely through the pied aesthetic that encompasses the flowers themselves, the dominant binaries of appearance/reality and temporal/eternal, and the discrete compositional elements of flowers and central image created by Seghers and his collaborators respectively.

Cristianos, 1963), no.235, p.244. O'Malley sees this final section of the *Ejercicios* as an expansion of the exhortation in the *Constituciones* to 'buscar en todas cosas a Dios nuestro Señor', and Ignatius as thus moving from a traditional position of *contemptus mundi*. See John W. O'Malley, *Saints or Devils Incarnate? Studies in Jesuit History* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013), 49, 125, 127.

³⁸ For flowers and this Ignatian principle, see Tapié, *Le sens caché*, 24; and for Seghers specifically, see Kevin F. Burke, 'Daniel Seghers (1590-1661)' in *The Ignatian Tradition: Spirituality in History*, edited by Kevin F. Burke, Eileen Burke-Sullivan (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2009), 100-03 (p.102). See also Ralph Dekoninck's nuanced essay, "'Chercher et trouver Dieu en toutes choses": Méditation et contemplation florale jésuite', in *Flore au paradis: Emblématique et vie religieuse aux XVI^e et XVII^e siècles*, edited by Paulette Choné and Bénédicte Gaulard (Glasgow: Glasgow Emblem Studies, 2004), 97-110.

³⁹ Loyola, *Ejercicios espirituales*, no.23, p.203.

⁴⁰ See, for example, Burke, 'Daniel Seghers (1590-1661)', 100, 102. Compare Merriam's equivocation here (*Seventeenth-Century*, 5, 14, 116-17, 117). Merriam's caution is grounded in her well-made point that, unlike the *Ejercicios*, Seghers' garlands rarely focus on the life of Christ (117).

⁴¹ On *mediocritas* and the early modern Jesuit ethos, see, for example, Ignatius' comments in *Obras completas*, 762, 854, 911.